

on 19 December 1989 at Shinay dam (Anjar environs). On 21 December H accompanied NNB and the others on a visit to the dam again, when only one bird was present there. The gull was in juvenile or immature plumage; its size, tern-like habit of picking up food from the surface of the water, its colouration, including the zigzag pattern on the wings, dark patch on the crown, no black feathers on the underside of the wings, a black band at the end of the tail and dull red legs and feet, all pointed to its being the little gull. The only feature we must take

note of was the colour of the bill, which was dull red with a dark tip, not mentioned in any of the references we have at hand except BIRDS OF COAST AND SEA (Bruce Campbell 1977) wherein it is stated: ".....and the bill turns from red to blackish", describing the winter plumage. The gull seen by us repeatedly came to settle for a while on a slab of stone less than 100 m from where we were standing.

N.N. BAPAT

August 16, 1990

M.K. HIMMATSINHJI

### 9. ON THE BLACK TERN *CHLIDONIAS NIGER NIGER* (LINN.)

On 25 May 1989 at about 1800 hrs, a single specimen of the black tern *Chlidonias niger niger* (Linn.) was obtained by me from a fisherman on the beach at Point Calimere Sanctuary, Tamil Nadu. The tern was apparently cast ashore by high wind and gales that had been blowing for the previous two days. The following observations were taken during the six day period that the bird remained with me due to its inability to fly.

The measurements are as follows: bill from feathers : 40 mm, bill from skull : 45 mm, tarsus : 19 mm, wing : 257 mm, tail (outer) : 104 mm, tail (inner): 60 mm.

No moult recorded.

It required to be fed several times a day although the total quantity eaten was very small (4-5

8 cm long fish approx.). Fish had to be cut into tiny slivers and were taken in narrow end first. Very little water was taken although provided.

Exceptionally tame and accepted food from hand without hesitation. Juvenile feeding or begging posture commonly adopted with head set low over the shoulder and the mouth slightly open. Grew considerably bolder till it flew out of the door on the seventh day and was seen to be pursued by a pair of brahminy kites. No further record of the bird.

I wish to thank the staff of the B.N.H.S. Station, Vedaranyam for help in identification and measurement. Their guidance in various other respects is also gratefully acknowledged.

April 4, 1990

VIVEK MENON

### 10. *STERNA BERGII THALASSINA* STRESEMANN — AN ADDITION TO THE AVIFAUNA OF SRI LANKA

There is uncertainty about the exact number of subspecies of *Sterna bergii*, the (large) crested or swift tern. Cramp (Chief Ed.) in BIRDS OF THE WESTERN PALEARCTIC lists four, namely :

*S.b. velox*, which inhabits the coasts of the Indian subcontinent, the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Sea, the Bay of Bengal to Burma and Western Malaysia. It is the largest and darkest.

*S. b. thalassina*, found in the Western Indian Ocean from about Tanzania to Chagos Island, Madagascar and the Mascarenes. It is the palest.

The nominate *S. b. bergii* is found at the southern end of Africa, in Namibia and S. Africa.

*S. b. cristata*, the eastern race, occurs from

China and Indonesia eastward.

Harrison (1985) adds a fifth: *S. b. enigma*, recently described from Mozambique.

Peters (1937) recognises five, which include *S. b. gwendolena*. Condon (1975) lists *gwendolena* for Australia, as well as two more, namely *pelecanoides* and *poliocerca*, bringing the number to eight or more subspecies worldwide. Thus there is not a generally accepted number of subspecies of *Sterna bergii*. Obviously a revision of the species is desirable.

In Sri Lanka the resident *S. b. velox* has dark slate-grey saddle and upperwings, in winter as well in summer. The appearance of these upperparts in the

perching bird is comparable to that of the lesser blackbacked gull *Larus fuscus fuscus*. For many years I have regularly observed a colony of these large crested terns, varying in number from 20 to over a hundred, perching and roosting on rocks just off the sea coast past Colombo Fort. These rocks are often closely packed with terns of several species (eight so far recorded). During the winter months (until the advent of the monsoon in May when they disperse because of high waves), I look at them through a telescope 3 to 4 times a day, more often on weekends. From about the beginning of 1990 I noted a strange and different individual amongst them, and since the middle of March, it was always present on the rocks together with up to 100 large crested terns, which had assumed breeding plumage (except for first year birds which look superficially like adults, but can be recognised by the different head pattern and somewhat patchy dark upperwings). The unusual bird stood out from amongst the others by its very pale, chalky-grey upperparts. In flight it looked entirely white. The plumage on the head was that of a first-year large crested tern. On several occasions I noted through a 40x telescope from close vantage positions, the following details in the perching bird:

**Size:** Notably smaller than the other large crested terns. All parts are proportionately smaller or shorter, e.g. legs and feet, crest, bill.

**Head:** Shape and general appearance like the others, with a similar but smaller crest. Forehead and fore-crown white, crown and nape streaked brownish-black, feathers on nape brownish, with a loose, untidy crest, often erected in defensive action against neighbouring birds. Crest feathers form dark lines on both sides of rear crown and nape. From eye across to ear coverts to side of nape small streaky pale-brownish patches. Some dark feathers in front of eye, and from eye to sides of crown.

**Bill:** Shorter and paler than that of other crested terns, very pale yellow, with greenish and horny tint, especially at base.

**Upperparts:** Lower nape white, saddle and upperwings light chalky grey, with longest outer primaries only slightly darker. Rump and tail same pale grey hue. When tail is spread for preening, dark shafts are visible.

**Underparts:** White.

**Wing:** No markings; when folded about same length as tail.

**Tail:** Chalky grey, forked, with two outer feathers longer and paler.

**Legs:** Proportionately shorter and thinner than in nearby other large crested terns. Dull black in colour.

**Habits:** No call noted. The bird seems to have a somewhat faster wing beat than *S. b. velox*. When disturbed from perch by crows, it flies rather low over the water, which it skims on occasion; flies higher on feeding flights. The behaviour (preening etc.) on the rocks is the same as that of the other crested terns. But it affects a defensive attitude toward its close neighbours (erection of crest, constant alertness) and it is often met with some aggressiveness (as a smaller bird?), but not to the extent of driving it away.

The bird could be mistaken for a winter sandwich tern *S. sandvicensis*, except for the pale yellow bill and the smaller size, both not readily noticeable at a distance.

Despite its somewhat shaggy look, the bird is perfectly healthy and capable of looking after itself. Under the circumstances I conclude that it belongs to the Western Indian Ocean subspecies *S. b. thalassina*. This is the first record of this race in Sri Lanka and in the Indian subcontinent, i.e. the Eastern Indian Ocean.

I am greatly obliged to Mrs. Amberley Moore of the British Ornithologists' Club, for the kind assistance with regard to the number and types of subspecies of *Sterna bergii*.

November 18, 1990

THILO W. HOFFMANN

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